

### We End Where We Began

Hulsman, John C.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB Köln

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hulsman, J. C. (2009). *We End Where We Began*. (DGAP-Standpunkt, 1). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-130145>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

## We End Where We Began

John C. Hulsman

*Die entscheidende Figur der amerikanischen Außenpolitik in den nächsten vier Jahren heißt nicht Barack Obama, sondern Hillary Clinton. Ausgelastet durch das Management der Finanz- und Wirtschaftskrise wird Obama zwar der letztinstanzliche Entscheider bei der internationalen Neuausrichtung Amerikas sein, seine politische und intellektuelle Kraft aber vor allem an anderer Stelle einsetzen müssen. Vizepräsident Joseph Biden wird ob seiner umfangreichen Erfahrung wohl ein wichtiger außenpolitischer Berater sein, hat aber zuvörderst die Aufgabe, das Amt des zweiten Mannes nach den Gore- und Cheney-Jahren wieder auf Normalmaß zu kürzen. Verteidigungsminister Robert Gates, ein Republikaner, den Obama von seinem Vorgänger übernimmt, wird mit der Abwicklung des Irak-Krieges und der Neubelebung des Afghanistan-Engagements beschäftigt sein und die große Linie der Politik kaum mitprägen. Dem Berater für Nationale Sicherheit, General James Jones, wird es obliegen, die verschiedenen Akteure auf einer gemeinsamen Linie zu halten, ein intellektuelles Schwergewicht hingegen ist er nicht. Obamas Team besteht vor allem aus soliden Handwerkern, ein großer geostrategischer Vordenker hingegen ist nicht darunter.*

### The Other Suspects

But what of Vice-President-elect Joe Biden, long the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee? Given his background and decades-long interest in foreign relations, shouldn't he be considered a candidate for the driver of American foreign policy? One of Biden's strengths is his refreshing habit of saying exactly what he means almost all the time; his is a very uncharacteristic American politician. Biden has been commendably clear that while he will be in the room for all the major decisions Obama has to make and will thus have a direct say in everything, his mission is to downsize the Vice-Presidency from the Cheney / Gore model. After the constitutional nightmare of the Cheney years this is surely to be welcomed. However, with the planned bureaucratic shrinkage of

his office, coupled with the fact that he was an early and vociferous supporter of Hillary for Secretary of State, Biden actually means what he has been saying about foreign affairs: He will not run the show.

Obama's decision to keep Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense was a masterstroke. At one blow he exacerbated a devastating split within the Republican Party, as realists on the left of the GOP warmly welcomed Gates's retention, while die-hard neo-cons glumly wondered how a Republican could work for the enemy. No one doubts Secretary Gates's ability. Given the thankless job of taking over after the shambles Donald Rumsfeld left the Department of Defense in, Gates has restored morale, overseen the partial stabilizing of Iraq through the surge (even if the plan's political goals have not been remotely met), and focused attention on the crisis

in Afghanistan. In fact, over military strategy in the Middle East, Gates's position is closer to that of his new boss rather than his old one: He has long advocated a shifting of troops and emphasis away from Iraq toward dealing with the resurgent Taliban and al-Qa-eda on the Afghan/Pakistan border, the actual people who perpetrated 9/11, rather than continuing to try to remake the Middle East in the American image.

But Gates has already made it clear that he is weary of his onerous job. While he has agreed to stay on, it is highly unlikely that he will be in his position by the end of Obama's first term; despite his recent denials he probably already has at least one foot out the door. Lame duck figures are rarely called upon to be the overall steward of American foreign policy. There is also the fact that Gates will be very focused on the major task of winding down Iraq and ramping up Afghanistan, which will leave him precious little time to concentrate on the larger geopolitical shifts that have occurred over the past decade, and how to adjust American foreign policy accordingly. Secretary Gates will continue to play a critical role, but he will not be *primus inter pares*.

The new head of the National Security Council, General James Jones, is a fine and capable compliment to Secretary Gates. During his time as Supreme Commander of NATO (SACEUR), Jones seemed to fit the mold of the soldier-diplomat, reminding admiring Europeans of George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower, in his ability to make coalition-building a central part of America's military strategy. Jones is an undoubted expert on Afghanistan, and will work closely with Gates to try to stabilize the very tenuous political situation there.

However, like another former general who held the NSC position, Brent Scowcroft, Jones is unlikely to fit one model for running the NSC—being the intellectual powerhouse who is the primary feeder of ideas to the new administration. Jones is no Zbigniew Brzezinski or Henry Kissinger. Rather, like Scowcroft, he will serve as the president's enforcer, keeping the major foreign policy players singing from the same hymnal, making sure that American foreign policy is coherent. This is

a tough and necessary job. However, it precludes him from intellectually dominating the new administration.

## What of Obama?

And what of the new President? It is true that constitutionally the chief executive has always been the dominant player in constructing American foreign policy. Further, most modern presidents have relished the role, as they have far fewer constraints placed on them than over domestic affairs (where Congress always has a significant role), and have a real chance to make their historical mark. For example, John Kennedy picked Dean Rusk to be his Secretary of State, precisely because Rusk was a second-class talent, competent to run the bureaucracy at State, but unlikely to get in the president's way. As is true with most modern presidents, JFK wanted to be his own Secretary of State.

Curiously, this is not the case with Obama. Overwhelmingly elected to deal with the worst economic crisis in 80 years (in exit polls voters named economic concerns the first six reasons they voted for a particular candidate), it is folly to expect Obama to have the time or inclination to deal with much of anything else. While he will always have the final say, nothing in his record as community organizer, Illinois State Senator, or junior Senator in Washington, would lead one to believe he wanted to be president to mold American foreign policy. This, coupled with the times we live in, means that while he still runs American Foreign Policy, his mind, time, and energy, will be directed elsewhere.

## Hillary, Again

These bureaucratic realities explain the mystery as to why Hillary would forsake her independent power base in the Senate (where she was electorally impregnable in New York) to work for the man who, in the eyes of many of her rabid supporters, stole the presidency from her. Always a clever tactician (if not much of a strategist), Hillary must have seen that she would have a unique opportunity, at last, to make her mark in history, apart from being merely a major but lesser player in the Bill Clinton drama. With the field, through both

temperament and circumstance, bureaucratically clear, it is amazingly Hillary, at the end of this wild year, who will largely shape American foreign policy in the new administration. Somehow, some way, much like Bill, Hillary found her way back to the top.

### Final Cautionary Notes

No one sensible doubts Mrs. Clinton's tenacity, brains, or drive. She emerged as a very successful Senator, who learned the very strange rules of the place, proving herself unusually effective at working across the aisle with Republicans to get things done. She has been underestimated throughout her career, to the peril of many. From a European point of view she is a committed internationalist, who will naturally try to resurrect the transatlantic alliance, while listening far more to the concerns of American allies.

So far, so good. But one major caveat must be placed on her ascendancy. First, while Obama's foreign policy team is unusually capable, there is not a geopolitical thinker among them. That is, these are people who play the cards that are dealt them very well, but are less good at considering the nature of the game they are playing. And given the shift in era, a geopolitical thinker is very much needed now. During the campaign, when foreign policy was discussed, Hillary exhibited a disturbing yearning to return to the easier, happier days of her husband's presidency. But history does not work like that; only reactionaries think the past can be recaptured.

It is worse if policy is based on a misreading of America's relative power in the world. Of course it is tempting to wish America back to the 1990s, when it was far and away the greatest power in the world, where signs of decline were few, and where America, through skillful engagement, could achieve the great majority of its

foreign policy goals. For Americans it is an understandable human reaction to yearn for this period; understandable, but horribly misguided. For the overarching task of American foreign policy in the new era will be to maintain America as first among equals in a time of increasing multipolarity, when rising powers such as China, India, Brazil and Russia must be made stakeholders in the new global order. To not accurately see America's position in this new era is to fail; there are precious few signs anyone around Mrs. Clinton truly understands the seismic geostrategic shifts of the past decade.

What this means is that the way remains open for new, edgy, innovative thinking about foreign relations, as policy-makers around the world struggle to make sense of a new era few of them have had the time or the inclination to think about. We end where we began: the man and the country that holds the world in the palm of his hand is one who can creatively see the world as it is, and devise concrete policies to further common global goals. May we all prove to have the intellect, and the decency, to make the new era a better one than the old.



John C. Hulsman, Ph. D., was the first Alfred von Oppenheim Scholar in Residence at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin. His new book, *The Godfather Doctrine*, will be published by Princeton University Press in February 2009, and is available for pre-order on the American version of <Amazon.com>.